Is your staff crippling your practice? Or are you crippling your staff?

By Sally McKenzie, CEO

Ignore it long enough and eventually the problem will take care of itself.

That's the old look-the-other-way approach. Just pretend it's not really a concern, and sooner or later those messy matters will just go away. If only that philosophy worked when dealing with employees.

Actually it's more likely that your staff — the good ones anyway — will just go away, and so too will a fair number of the patients, and then there are practice revenues that begin to dwindle as well. While the problems stay put, the profits are taking a pounding. And those “little issues” just keep piling up. Poor performance, conflict, staff vacancy after staff vacancy, stress, tension, etc. all just keep multiplying, but you keep telling yourself that it’s just a phase. Everything’s going to be fine. I’d like to agree with you, and tell you that you’re right, but you’re not.

Admittedly, staff issues are a major challenge. You rely on your employees to keep the practice running. You want to trust that they can and will operate in the best interests of the practice. All the more reason you need to look carefully at your team and ask yourself if you really do have confidence in them. Do they uphold the standard of excellence that you have committed yourself to?

Or has your practice become home base for those who simply go along to get along. No new ideas here. Change? Why would we want to do that? Aren’t things working just fine? What’s the problem with status quo? Bare minimum performance would be the modus operandi for this crew. But you don’t want to shake things up because Business Manager Carol knows the computers. She’s comfortable and isn’t going to go out of her way to strain her brain. She also hasn’t had a performance review since ... well, who can remember those things.

Needless to say, there’s not a lot of incentive for her to step it up, to improve efficiency, to look for ways to reduce costs and increase revenues. Nope she’s just there warming the chair and, as far as she’s concerned, the dentist should be happy she does that so well. Comfortable Carol sets the tone for the entire staff. They see what she does, or rather, doesn’t do. “If she can sit up there and do practically nothing all day, why should I work so hard?” It’s the “bare minimum mindset.”

You simply cannot afford to ignore staffing issues. They never just go away. They become deeper and more divisive. The results then begin to manifest themselves in poor patient relations and, ultimately, lower profits.

The good news is that most employees sincerely want to perform well. Yes, the Comfortable Carols and never-do-more-than-the-minimum staffs are out there, but most employees — the ones you want to keep — want to be challenged. They want to feel like they are part of something bigger than themselves. And if you’ll invest some time and resources to guide your team members, you’ll be the first to enjoy the pay off of better performance and higher productivity. What’s more, you will learn very quickly if Comfortable Carol and the rest of this lackluster crew are committed to poor performance or if they are simply in need of direction and guidance from you. Here’s how.

Don’t just fill the position

I know it’s nerve-racking to have a vacancy or two in your practice, but curb the urge to hire any warm body off the street. Make sure the person you are considering is right for the position before she is another name on your payroll. Computerized Internet testing tools, such as those available through McKenzie Management, allow you to assess applicants to determine who would be the best match for both the job and the practice.

The procedure is simple. Once you have a couple of strong contenders for a job, the applicants answer a list of questions online. Just minutes later, you receive a statistically reliable report enabling you to determine if the candidate would be a good match for the position. It’s a scientifically-based tool you can rely on in making critical hiring decisions. And in the dental practice, every hire is critical.

Don’t leave them hanging

I know you think they should have
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figured this one out by now, but have you ever actually told your employees what their job duties are? With input from your team, develop job descriptions for each team member. Define the job that each staff member is responsible for performing. Specify the skills the person in the position should have. Outline the specific duties and responsibilities of the job. Include the job title, a summary of the position and its responsibilities, and a list of job duties. This can be both a real eye opener and the ideal tool to spell out to employees exactly what is expected of them.

Don't make them guess

How am I supposed to answer the phone? How am I supposed to ask for payment? How am I supposed to encourage treatment acceptance? How am I supposed to schedule for production? Train every member of your team. Betsy may have worked in a dental practice before, but that doesn’t mean she knows your practice protocols. Train her. Joe may be great with patients one-on-one, but he may hate dealing with people on the phone. Get him help; otherwise he will unknowingly cost you a fortune in lost patients.

Don't expect results ...

Don’t expect results if you don’t set goals and monitor performance. Everyone — from the dentist to the person greeting patients when they walk in the door — needs measurable goals. It is essential to have general practice goals, production goals, continuing education goals, etc. for everyone and every area of the practice.

The goals you and your team establish should be specific. For example, if you want to produce $80,000 in dentistry each month, your scheduling coordinator needs to know this. She/he also needs a clear understanding of how to schedule to meet daily production goals.

In addition to clear and specific goals, it’s time to inspect what you expect. Used effectively, employee performance measurements and reviews provide critical information that is essential in your ability to make major decisions regarding personnel, overhead, management systems, and practice productivity overall.

Moreover, they enable you to identify if it’s lack of motivation or the absence of direction that has created the perfect environment for Fortunate Carol and her equally unambitious companions. The fact is that most dental employees seek to be challenged, to be given the opportunity to pursue innovative approaches in their work, to be appropriately rewarded for results, and yes, to be held accountable.

As we have seen time and again, employees rated against objective measures place more trust and confidence in the process. They also see the direct relationship between their performance, the success of the practice and ultimately their potential for individual achievement.

Don't keep it all to yourself

Reward your team. Celebrate success and encourage each member of your staff to not just perform a task, but to excel. Inspire the team with a practice vision and goals, and recognize the progress you make together in achieving those goals.